

## Martin Harris

### **The Life of Martin Harris: Patterns of Humility and Repentance**

by Larry E. Morris

Production editor, Joseph Smith Papers

From the life of Martin Harris we learn that when we are humble, we are blessed, and that we can make important contributions to the Lord's work despite past mistakes.

Church history offers many stories of Saints who were shining examples of faith and devotion in the face of great pressure, persecution, and personal weakness. One of the most memorable examples comes from the life of Martin Harris. Although he is often remembered for his loss of the first 116 manuscript pages of the Book of Mormon, he overcame that fault to become a key figure in the coming forth of the Book of Mormon—one of the monumental events of the Restoration. As Elder Dallin H. Oaks of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles has said, "Martin's subsequent faithfulness [after losing the manuscript] continues under a shadow from which this important man should be rescued."<sup>1</sup>

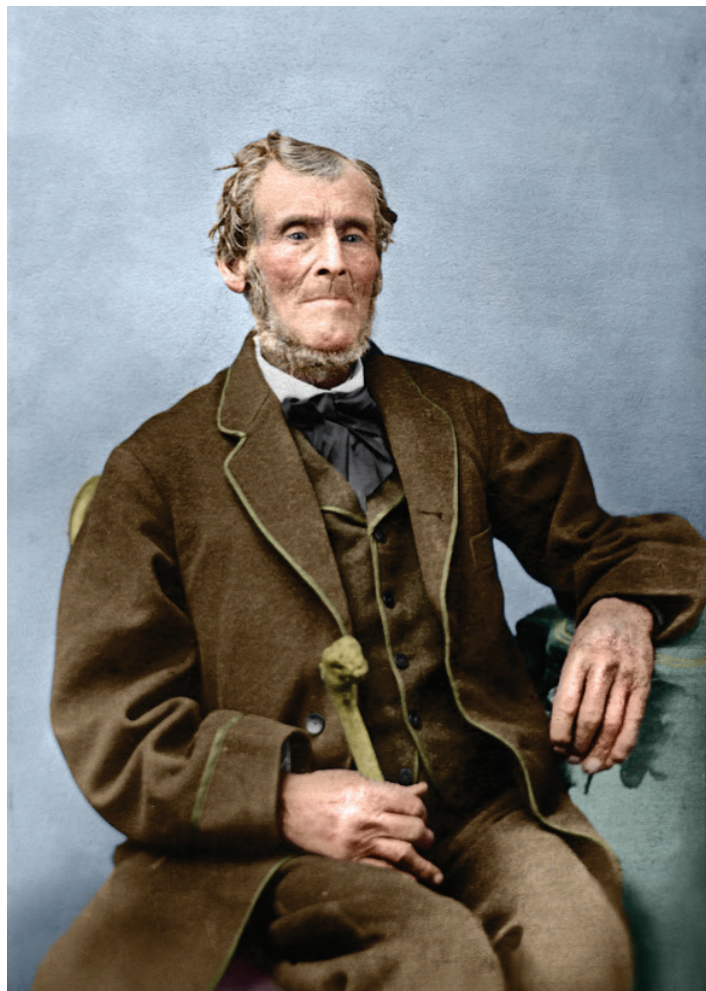
#### **A Friend and Gentleman**

In 1827, Martin was a well-respected and prosperous landowner in Palmyra, New York, USA. That year he heard about the plight of Joseph Smith, a man more than 20 years his junior who lived on a farm just outside of Palmyra, who was translating golden plates and was having difficulty protecting the plates from thieves.

Although Martin knew that helping Joseph could damage his reputation as a farmer and businessman, Martin's interest was piqued. He talked with Joseph and other members of the Smith family. Then, Martin reported, "I retired to my bedroom and prayed God to show me concerning these things." An answer came through "the still small voice spoken in the soul. Then I was satisfied that it was the Lord's work, and I was under a covenant to bring it forth."<sup>2</sup>

Martin gave Joseph 50 dollars, enabling Joseph and his wife, Emma, to move to Harmony, Pennsylvania, USA, where Emma's parents lived.

Shortly thereafter, from April to June 1828, Martin acted as scribe for Joseph while the Prophet translat-



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ed the plates. After the first 116 pages were translated, Martin began to plead with Joseph to let him show the Book of Mormon manuscript to friends and relatives. When Joseph finally agreed, the result was disastrous—Martin lost the precious document. A revelation called Martin "a wicked man" and reprimanded Joseph because he had "feared man more than God" (D&C 3:12, 7).

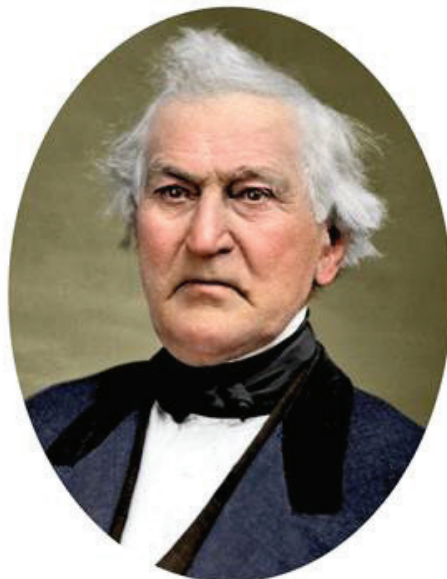
In addition, the plates were taken from the Prophet, and he temporarily lost the gift to translate. However, both Joseph and Martin were sincerely repentant, and the Lord forgave them both. Translation of the plates resumed, though Martin no longer acted as scribe.

In spite of this humbling experience, the penitent Martin did not lose his faith. In the spring of 1829, he returned to Harmony, sincerely desiring an addition-

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OLIVER COWDERY



DAVID WHITMER



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al witness concerning the plates. A revelation sought at Martin's request promised that "three of my servants ... shall know of a surety that [Joseph's claims about the plates] are true, for from heaven will I declare it unto them. I will give them power that they may behold and view these things as they are" (D&C 5:11–13).

Promised that he could be one of the three if he humbled himself before the Lord, (see D&C 5:23–28). Martin left Harmony rejoicing. While traveling, Martin enthusiastically told his fellow stagecoach passengers of his experiences with Joseph. One of these passengers later wrote of this event and recounted, "Smith read to him a good deal of the [gold] bible [and Martin] repeated to those in the Stage verse after verse of what Smith had read to him."<sup>3</sup> Firmly recommitted, Martin thus became one of the first to testify of the Book of Mormon.

About this same time, Martin's wife, Lucy, who had grown quite hostile to Joseph Smith and his work, "entered a complaint against Joseph, before a certain magistrate of Lyons [New York],"<sup>4</sup> accusing the Prophet of defrauding her husband. After three men claimed that Joseph had made up the story about the plates, Martin himself was called to testify. Once again demonstrating his humility and his loyalty to Joseph, Martin swore that Joseph had not defrauded him, adding that "as to the plates which he professes to have, gentlemen,

if you do not believe it, but continue to resist the truth, it will one day be the means of damning your souls." The magistrate promptly ended the proceeding and tore up the record of the testimony of the three hostile witnesses.<sup>5</sup>

### Witness of the Book of Mormon

In April of 1829, a schoolteacher by the name of Oliver Cowdery volunteered to be Joseph Smith's scribe. The two of them worked at a blinding pace, completing the translation of the Book of Mormon in approximately 10 weeks. Shortly after that, Joseph announced to Martin, "You have got to humble yourself before your God this day, that you may obtain a forgiveness of your sins. If you do, it is the will of God that you should look upon the plates, in company with Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer."<sup>6</sup>

Joseph and Martin then walked to a nearby grove with Oliver and David, where they called upon the Lord. When the promised divine manifestation did not develop, Martin suggested that he was the cause and withdrew. Subsequently, the angel Moroni appeared and showed the plates to Joseph, Oliver, and David. Joseph then sought out Martin and discovered him engaged in humble prayer. Then the two of them were blessed with a vision similar to the one that had just taken place with the other witnesses.<sup>7</sup>



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descend from heaven in a dazzling light of glory. ... I saw the gold plates. I saw him turn the leaves over one by one ... and I was commanded by God's voice to testify to all the world what I had seen and heard."13

The patterns of humility and repentance in the life of Martin Harris powerfully illustrate that humility allows the Spirit to be with us. Such an attitude fosters a desire to follow the Savior, do His work, and serve others. As Martin's remarkable experience shows, repentance is the key to remaining humble. The Savior's Atonement in our behalf makes this possible.

### Notes

1. Dallin H. Oaks, "The Witness: Martin Harris," *Ensign*, May 1999, 36.
2. "Mormonism—No. II," *Tiffany's Monthly*, May 1859, 170.
3. William S. Sayre to James T. Cobb, August 31, 1878, Theodore A. Schroeder Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society Archives, Madison, Wisconsin, USA, cited in Larry E. Morris, "The Conversion of Oliver Cowdery," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, vol. 16, no. 1 (2007): 15.
4. Lucy Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith, the Prophet, and His Progenitors for Many Generations* (1853), 132.
5. Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, 133–135.
6. Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, 138.
7. See *History of the Church* 1:54–55.
8. Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, 139.
9. Value calculated by finding relative worth of \$3,000 from 1829 to 2010 and analyzing the Consumer Price Index and GDP deflator from [www.measuringworth.com/uscompare](http://www.measuringworth.com/uscompare).
10. Susan Easton Black and Larry C. Porter, "For the Sum of Three Thousand Dollars," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, vol. 14, no. 2 (2005): 6. On April 7, 1831, Martin sold a sizeable portion of his farm to pay the printing bill.
11. Dallin H. Oaks, "The Witness," 36.
12. Rhett Stephens James, "Harris, Martin," in Arnold K. Garr, Donald Q. Cannon, and Richard O. Cowan, eds., *Encyclopedia of Latter-day Saint History* (2000), 469.
13. William Pilkington, "A Dying Testimony Given by Martin Harris," *Church History Library* (spelling and capitalization standardized).



### Martin's Faithfulness by Lewis A. Ramsey

"What do we learn from this example?"

1. Witnesses are important, and the testimony of the Three Witnesses to the Book of Mormon is impressive and reliable.
2. Happiness and spiritual progress lie in following the leaders of the Church.
3. There is hope for each of us, even if we have sinned and strayed from a favored position.

"The Lord's invitation is warm and loving: 'Come back and feast at the table of the Lord, and taste again the sweet and satisfying fruits of fellowship with the saints.'"

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**“The Witness: Martin Harris”**  
Elder Dallin H. Oaks  
of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles  
Ensign, May 1999

Martin Harris was a prosperous man with a large farm and rich belongings (such as the engraved watch above). The house pictured here (above, right) currently sits on the farm Martin once mortgaged to pay for the printing of the Book of Mormon. His original house burned down and was replaced in 1852 by this one.

Though Martin Harris is remembered for his mistake of losing 116 manuscript pages of the Book of Mormon, he also was dedicated to seeing the Book of Mormon published and accepted by the public. He took a transcription of some of the book’s ancient characters to professor Charles Anthon in hopes of obtaining a certificate of authenticity, and he worked with printer E. B. Grandin and Joseph Smith (depicted above with Martin) to finance the book’s publication and sell copies.

Martin was chosen to be one of the Three Witnesses of the Book of Mormon. However, the angel did not appear to show the men the plates until Martin had withdrawn and prayed for forgiveness. When the Saints went west, he did not go with them. He listed himself in the 1860 census as a “Mormon preacher,” and he acted as the caretaker of the Kirtland Temple.

### **Anthon Transcript** by Danel W. Bachman

The Anthon Transcript was a sheet of paper, thought to be lost, upon which Joseph Smith copied sample “reformed Egyptian” characters from the plates of the Book of Mormon. In the winter of 1828, Martin Harris showed these characters to Dr. Charles Anthon of Columbia College (now Columbia University), and hence the name.

In February 1828, Martin Harris, a farmer from Palmyra, New York, visited the Prophet Joseph Smith, who was then residing in Harmony, Pennsylvania, where he had just begun to translate the Book of Mormon (see Book of Mormon Translation By Joseph Smith). Smith had earlier turned to Harris for financial backing for the



**Martin Harris meets with Professor Anthon**

translation; now Harris came to Harmony to take samples of the reformed Egyptian characters from the gold plates (cf. Morm. 9:32), thereafter to obtain scholarly opinion about their authenticity. Smith gave Harris a copy of some of the characters, along with a translation, which Harris then presented to at least three scholars in the eastern United States. The most important of these, given the nature of the inquiry, was Charles Anthon, an acclaimed classicist at Columbia College.

The two men’s accounts of the meeting differ. Harris said that Professor Anthon gave him a certificate verifying the authenticity of the characters but that when Anthon learned that Joseph Smith claimed to have received the plates from an angel, he took the certificate back and destroyed it. Anthon, for his part, left written accounts in 1834 and 1841 in which he contradicted himself on whether he had given Harris a written opinion about the document. In both accounts, apparently to dissociate himself from appearing to promote the book, he maintained that he told Harris that he (Harris) was a victim of a fraud. Modern research suggests that, given the state of knowledge of Egyptian in 1828, Anthon’s views would have been little more than opinion. Whatever the case may be about a written statement from Anthon, Harris returned to Harmony ready to assist Joseph Smith with the translation.

The reorganized church of Jesus Christ of latter-day saints possesses a handwritten text known as the Anthon Transcript that contains seven horizontal

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lines of characters apparently copied from the plates. David Whitmer, who once owned the document, said it was this text that Martin Harris showed to Charles Anthon. However, this claim remains uncertain because the transcript does not correspond with Anthon's assertion that the manuscript he saw was arranged in vertical columns. Even if the document is not the original, it almost certainly represents characters either copied from the plates in Joseph Smith's possession or copied from the document carried by Harris. Twice in late 1844, after the Prophet's martyrdom, portions of these symbols were published as characters that Joseph Smith had copied from the gold plates—once as a broadside and once in the December 21 issue of the Mormon newspaper *The Prophet* (see *Magazines*). In 1980 a document surfaced that seemed to match Anthon's description and appeared to be the original Anthon Transcript. But in 1987, Mark W. Hofmann admitted that he had forged it (see *Forgeries of Historical Documents*).

Harris's visit with scholars was more than just an interesting sidelight in the history of Mormonism. By his own report, Harris returned to Harmony convinced that the characters were genuine. Thereafter, he willingly invested his time and resources to see the *Book of Mormon* published. Moreover, the Prophet, Harris himself, and later generations of Latter-day Saints have viewed his visit as a fulfillment of Isaiah 29:11-12, which speaks of "a book that is sealed" being delivered to "one that is learned" who could not read it (PJS 1:9; cf. 2 Ne. 27:6-24; see also *Book of Mormon, Biblical Prophecies About*). His efforts apparently encouraged Joseph Smith

in the initial stages of the translation. The Anthon Transcript is also important to subsequent generations as an authentic sample of characters that were inscribed on the gold plates and thus one of the few tangible evidences of their existence. [See also *Book of Mormon Language*.] Illustration Charles Anthon (1787-1867), a professor of classical languages at Columbia College (now Columbia University) in New York from 1820 to 1867. His library in 1828 included recent works on hieroglyphic and demotic Egyptian.

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